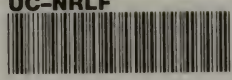


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Publication No. 33

# THE CHARITY DIRECTOR

A BRIEF STUDY OF  
HIS RESPONSIBILITIES

BY

ADA ELIOT SHEFFIELD

MEMBER OF THE MASSACHUSETTS STATE BOARD OF CHARITY



CHARITY ORGANIZATION DEPARTMENT OF THE  
RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION  
ROOM 613, 105 EAST TWENTY-SECOND STREET  
NEW YORK CITY  
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## THE CHARITY DIRECTOR

The need of defining the duties of the charity director arises from the fact that his unpaid work is without the spur of an immediate self-interest. Service of this kind many people think of as so much a work of supererogation that standards are inapplicable. They regard membership on a board as already constituting virtue, not as involving obligations which, once undertaken, it becomes remiss to neglect. The assumption behind this point of view is that those who fill unpaid positions do so from sheer altruism; that though they may show the average selfishness in other relations of life, the moment they enter this field they rise above ambition, love of power or social prestige, the need of spending surplus energy, or even a personal taste for public affairs, into a sublimated love of humanity. Such a notion of altruism not only implies an unnatural repudiation of interest in one's own faculties, but it thereby puts this form of public service on a false, if not hypocritical ground. Public spirit is rarely a spontaneous sentiment. It is rather that gradual expanding of the imagination that accompanies insight into social maladjustments. One who does faithful service, whatever his original motive, comes little by little to identify himself with his wider interests. His conception of society becomes no longer bounded by his relation with the individuals of his own group; it includes groups which had previously seemed far removed from his personal welfare. The state in time becomes to him a living organism of which he is a part. Such a development does not efface a man's self; else it would destroy his incentive to maintain a high standard of work: rather it enlarges that self, until it makes his own satisfactions in life come to be identical with the public weal.

The directing of a charity may, however, be selfishly done, in which case its personal rewards in the way of prestige and of an enjoyable avocation become ends in themselves. Hence altruism must take rise from an enlightened conception of the rôle of a director.

**The Analogy of the Business Director** This rôle should be conceived of as that of a representative of the community, planning and guiding the work with the public interest in view. The function of the charity director thus differs from that of the director of a business corporation, in that the latter, representing stockholders, has the duty of safeguarding merely the money interests of a limited group of people. Whatever change in this regard the socializing of industry may bring about, he is at present not ordinarily expected to

look out for the interest of the public. As to the scope of influence of a business director, although in theory he has a guiding hand, in practice he serves rather to check than to initiate. The view of his function held by able managers of large corporations is expressed by Mr. Russell Robb in a lecture before the Harvard School of Business: "Ten or twelve representatives acting together cannot give effective administration. Numbers are good for conference, to protect against prejudice, . . . to bring out by discussion all relevant factors, to throw upon problems side-lights from varied experience, and to assure regular procedure; but the autocrat's command is superior in effectiveness."\* Mr. Robb evidently has in mind the promptness and vigor of decision often essential to business success, and apparently accepts boards of directors as an appendage of doubtful value, which the public has forced on incorporated business. But the opposition that he makes out between collective wisdom and "effectiveness" seems to involve a contradiction, since the autocrat's guidance, subject to prejudice and snap-judgment, is bound to be ineffective in its upshot. A layman might ask whether the attacks to which business men are today subjected may not to some extent hark back to this limited and short-sighted conception of "effectiveness." In any case, the autocrat in business has a justification which finds no parallel in charity. With him success turns from time to time on opportunities that must be grasped by prompt and resolute action, and that may never recur. With charity, on the other hand, the success is at bottom an educational one. Its effectiveness depends upon the amount and quality of thought which its administrators bring to bear in formulating their policies in the light of civic ideals. The need for quick action in charity does not arise on questions of broad import, but is confined to such occasional matters of current detail as would necessarily rest for decision not with directors but with the manager. The policies which directors of charity put into effect are among the constant educational forces in the state. Charities are day by day defining what is legitimate dependency. By their action in case after case they are telling not only the class that sink below the line of self-care, but those large numbers just above it, under what conditions and at what point the natural responsibilities of the individual will be assumed by society. These policies raise expectations

\* Russell Robb: *Stone and Webster Public Service Journal*, June, 1909. Mr. Robb does justice in this same lecture to the compensating advantages secured through a board of directors, for he says, "Whatever may seemingly be gained temporarily [by one-man control] through vigorous and able direction is more than offset by the instability or uncertainty of the corporate affairs. Organizations are thus having brought to them a new problem; they have to provide stability in administration as well as efficiency, to preserve the vigor of initiative of the individual, and yet to benefit by the judgment of many, and they have to assure the continuity in administration that is demanded by the span of life of the corporation."

According to Mr. Lawrence R. Dicksee (*Business Organisation*, Longmans), boards of directors in England exercise more control than is usual in the United States.



according to which considerable groups of people adapt their lives. Hence frequent or ill-considered changes of principle foster in them a gambling spirit that is the sure precursor of increasing dependency. Thus charity is more complex than business in that it has to reckon with a larger number of intangible forces in the field of human motive. When a business is feebly managed, its balance-sheet tells the story. When a charity does slack and perfunctory work, its books may show an actual surplus. Charitable agencies make it a point not to cover the same field; and since a charity therefore meets no competition, neither the number nor the satisfaction of its beneficiaries is a reliable indication of its efficiency. Philanthropy, indeed, differs radically from business in aiming to do away with the very need of its work.

The conception of a director as a representative of society appointed to guide the disbursing of funds in such a way as to conserve the public interest, discloses the nature of his duties to be three-fold. He must help choose the personnel of his board; he must master the purpose and methods of its work; he must help maintain an esprit de corps among its employees.\*

#### **The Personnel of the Board**

With the self-perpetuating board of a private charity, the first duty is that of choosing the best available fellow-members. What considerations should guide this choice? The members of a board should be men and women commanding leisure to do the required work. Boards like to make up their number with "representative" names; that is, with the names of those prominent in business or social circles, those whose backing, they think, will inspire public confidence. Of such a practice it may be remarked, that if "representative" people really understand and follow the work of the society, it is the part of wisdom to give their activity an official standing. But if, as frequently happens, the recognized leader is too busy to do anything beyond making out a yearly check, then to place him on the board amounts to a deception of the public. The assurance thereby implied that a man of recognized character and ability is helping direct its work is bound to prove fallacious; and as contributors find this sort of pretense to be common, they will grow to distrust all representative names. A lady once told me that she had accepted enrolment on a certain board with the express understanding that she was to serve it solely by her name. Of its work she could not say whether or not it deserved support. In another case, the new president of a small society called a meeting of its members only to learn that they had never met before, and that not one of them knew anything either of the methods of this agency, of its very confused finances, or of the fact that it was duplicating the efforts of better equipped charities. At least two of these board

\* An exhaustive discussion of a director's duties would of course deal with the large and intricate questions of policy as to the raising and administering of funds. The administering of the work here considered involves the duties most distinctive of charity.

members were citizens of standing—one of them a man known and respected throughout New England. For two years his name had unquestionably influenced many to help support a superfluous charity. Such directors err through lack of clear thinking as to what should be the obligation of their society toward the public.

Besides men of business and social standing, our boards like to include members with some distinction in social work. If these experienced men and women will restrict themselves to such interests as they can reflect upon, their prestige may rightly enlist public confidence in a society. But if they yield to the temptation, sure to come to them, to join board after board, even long experience cannot save them from becoming mere names. It is obviously impossible that any man should be of much real value as a director in many charities of various scope. He lives in a bustle of service without much real accomplishment. I myself once served as secretary of a committee made up entirely of men and women notable in charity. Anyone would have said that such a committee would direct with rare judgment. Had they given time, their long experience should have been fertile in results. As it was, they were all much too busy to do more than attend meetings. This they did faithfully; but the work in question required more than that. Though knowing, as few philanthropists know, the approved solution of recognized family problems, they could not learn, from meetings crowded with routine work, just how and where ideal solutions should be so modified as to apply under conditions that made co-operation with outsiders difficult. Only by giving a couple of hours a month to talk the work over with their secretary, could they have obtained an appreciation of this difficulty. Two or three comparatively obscure men and women, of good judgment and with adequate time to give, would have strengthened this apparently exceptional committee. I believe that any board or committee ought to count among its members several persons chosen irrespective of wealth or prominence, and solely for the amount and quality of regular work they will do. It is true that in order to raise its funds a society needs the backing of members well-known and in the public confidence, but it is equally true that financial success demands that a board should be active. Dummy directors do not attract money in the long run, whereas an active board, even though its members have no other prominence, may gradually win a reputation that will build up a list of steady contributors. A board whose members are at once well-known, experienced, and active, is the charity organizer's dream. As for citizens of recognized standing for wealth or personal achievement, but too busy to bear a real responsibility, boards can secure their general approval and good-will by means of frankly honorary offices.

The directors of a charity should first, then, be men and women with leisure to guide its affairs. Secondly, they should be those who are representative of different elements in the community. A board that includes members from various sections of the city, from diverse

social groups, religious denominations, and even nationalities, gives the charity a secure hold on public interest, and extends its opportunity for influence and education. It is of course conceivable that the administrative body may become too heterogeneous to pull together, but the far commoner danger is that members will prefer always to elect their personal friends. This may develop a group of workers that, while compact and harmonious, makes other workers in the field at large shrink from offering any professional co-operation that might be misconstrued as an effort to get themselves included in a social clique. Some years ago while attempting to awaken an interest throughout a group of small cities in a state-wide committee, I called on a lady active and esteemed in her local charities. Her first question was, "Who are the people that run this committee?" I gave the names. "Yes," she said, "it is the same old crowd. They don't really include us, nor even important workers in their own town." And in spite of the evidence that my calling on her afforded of their desire to broaden, I could get no further response. In a second city, my effort met the answer that the "people down in X—think we don't know anything, so what's the use of joining the committee." This "same old crowd," from whom these people felt themselves aloof, was made up of devoted workers, regular in their attendance at meetings, generous with their time, and in some cases open-handed with their money. The growth of a compact group like theirs comes about by no invidious intention. It begins at the pioneer stage in a charity, when those most interested draw together those whom they already know and can count on to put in hard work. Their work increases their original interest and adds the new bond of problems in common. They tend to coalesce. Having started together, they feel a closer tie with one another than with outsiders. It takes some effort to draw in new people; so they follow the line of least resistance, put one another on committees, and assign important work to the same persons over and over, rather than go to the exertion of initiating novices. If, in course of time, these men and women join repeatedly in committees and societies, they grow more and more accustomed to pulling together, and the line of least resistance becomes a groove. Their influence has been worthily gained; but their policy of inbreeding narrows its scope, and makes them liable to the reproach of maintaining a "charity trust." And what is the effect on the spirit of a city's charities when this policy results in "interlocking directorates" between different boards? By emphasizing the same point of view, and obstructing the development of diverse methods, its tendency can hardly be other than gradually to make the charities of such a city narrow-visioned and provincial.

**The Director's** Next in importance to the director's duty of  
**Mastery of Pur-** choosing good fellow-members, comes that of mas-  
**poses and Meth-** tering the purpose and methods of his charity. I  
**ods** suggest three courses which a trustee should expect  
to follow in order to make himself familiar with the work for which



he shares responsibility. First, he should at the outset acquaint himself thoroughly with the various departments of the board's activity, in order to understand them as a necessary ground-work for its policies. Second, he ought to give regularly some time, if no more than two hours a month, to discussing business with the executive officer, in order that the board may keep an inside familiarity with the application of its policies, and that board and executive may thresh out differences of opinion more at length than can be done at set meetings. Third, he should, through the counsels of any committee to which he has been appointed, follow the secretary's work to observe how it conforms to the principles laid down, and where it may entail departures therefrom. In the latter event he would of course pass the question on to the full board. Let us consider these three courses in their order.

1. As custodians of a public trust, directors should understand the details of its execution. This does not mean that they should follow the routine day in and day out, but that they should know precisely what is the nature of the daily case work, in order to frame sound principles. One sometimes meets a curious lack of respect for case work among those who have attained to authority. They regard directing as something done from a pinnacle, and seem to think that they can get a broad view without knowing what they are getting it of. A policy is, or ought to be, merely a general principle developed by a thorough knowledge of many individual instances. If the facts brought out in the handling of these cases are insufficient or irrelevant, the policy built upon them is vicious. A new director, therefore, on assuming his duties, should acquaint himself in detail with the methods by which his society deals with its beneficiaries. In such a study, its secretary should be his guide. This is the only one of a trustee's duties which may make a serious drain on his time. It would not, however, have to be repeated.

2. A trustee should allow some time each month for consultation with the secretary. In the untrammelled discussion of an occasional spare hour, two people can canvass the weak or strong points in their methods with a specificness impracticable at meetings. The trustee thus clears his mind as to whither their procedure is tending; the secretary gets a knowledge equally valuable, namely, that of his director's personality. One danger has here to be guarded against. The director must be careful that he and the secretary do not settle out of court matters that should properly come before a committee or before the board. Closet decisions have at once the effect of deadening the interest of other members.

3. Trustees should follow the secretary's work through committee meetings. Only thus can they keep familiar with the current work of the whole society, that for which it was organized, and by the quality of which it will be judged. If this work is done slackly or injudiciously, the reproach will come home to them, not as a "soulless corporation," but as individuals. It is through these smaller meetings in committee

that a director can judge how policies fit conditions, and where they need modification or change.

**A SAFEGUARD AGAINST PERFUNCTORY WORK.**—The concern with details here advocated for directors is justifiable on two grounds. Trustees should know details, because in charity work it is easy to bluff. The reason for this is that the evidences of its results are scattered among the homes of the families helped, and that to verify these results one would almost have to duplicate the original labor. Poor people for whom ineffective work is done make no complaint; other workers who in seeking co-operation meet only a half-hearted response, turn elsewhere, but rarely express themselves in a concerted protest; those who give money lose interest, they don't know why, but really because the society is perfunctory; and gradually public confidence dies without any explicit complaint having been made. The story of failure in social work lies most often in what a society does not do; and the general public is not quick to put its finger on sins of omission.

Directors of a philanthropy, therefore, need to exercise watchfulness. Slackness in charity can go on for months without showing itself, if trustees do not first understand thoroughly, and then follow to some extent, the details of their work. Its signs, however, are discernible to those who know for what to be on the lookout. For instance, inefficiency will be disclosed by a careful study of records. Are they full and specific, or scanty and vague? Do they show resourcefulness in co-operating with other charities? It will also be disclosed by a close questioning of agents. Do they talk with definiteness or do they take refuge in generalities? When a social worker answers, as did one to my question how she dealt with her cases, and what were her results, that she really could not put it into words because her work was "inspirational," one may suspect incompetency.

**INTERACTION BETWEEN DIRECTOR AND EXECUTIVE.**—The second ground on which a concern with details is justifiable is that it affords a basis for a wholesome and stimulating relation between a board and its secretary. Trustees sometimes feel that the duty of a board is to select the right executive and then back him up; that they should trust him to carry out their policies "with a free hand." Surely this makes a very difficult position for the executive officer. I have happened to work both under trustees that followed my work and knew what I was doing, and under trustees that, having selected me, backed me up, but never knew when I did well or when I did ill. I can say from my own experience, what I think others will confirm, that it is exceedingly difficult to hold oneself up to high standards when one's work passes equally without comment whether good or indifferent. The employee has to rely for motive power solely upon his own brain and conscience. It is as relaxing never to incur disapproval by remissness as it is discouraging never to win approval by zeal. A board should therefore help the secretary to get the best he can out of himself by taking note of his efforts, his difficulties, and his



success. If it is well for the secretary that his directors should understand details, it is equally well for the board that he should keep them fully apprised of his problems. A far-sighted secretary will see that such an open course will enhance his board's estimate of his position, and increase their confidence in him. A short-sighted man will probably reason that a group of people who cannot share his familiarity with the daily routine are not qualified to direct him, and that, in order to avert mistakes, he must make the important decisions himself. Such an officer, instead of keeping his board informed, is likely to leave them more and more in the dark. He will pad their meetings with comparatively unimportant matters, and determine policies for himself. He does not reflect upon the unfair position in which he thereby places trustees answerable to the public for decisions of which they are completely ignorant. He is really trying to combine at once the gratifications of an independent position with a subordinate's refuge from responsibility when it becomes uncomfortable. I sometimes think that executive officers fail to appreciate the contact with public opinion which they get from a representative board. Opposition from its members at which a secretary chafes may be in miniature the same opposition which his plans would meet with from the public. When he cannot marshal his facts and arguments so as to carry conviction with his own board, he may usually be safe in concluding that he would also meet a formidable dissent outside. If, on the other hand, a secretary complains that his board is inactive, that he has to shoulder the whole responsibility, it is a fairly safe guess that his work is not first class. Either he does not arouse the interest of his directors by trusting them to decide important issues, or he himself cannot distinguish between what has wide bearing and what is matter of detail. In the former case, he betrays a misconception of his function as an educator by caring more to secure a single decision than to start his board thinking about the whole question. If he can interest his trustees in the issue before them, it should be of comparatively slight importance that on one point they come to the same opinion as himself, for as soon as trustees lose the sense of their weight as an administrative body, their zeal flags. In the latter case, a secretary who is too unreflective to recognize the bearing of policies tires his board with trifles, and enmeshes essential points in wordiness and irrelevance. Tedious board meetings make an inactive board.

The division of responsibility between secretary and board is, broadly speaking, that the board forms policies, the secretary puts them into effect. But since the executive commands the facts on which policies must be based, and since the board must see that decisions are carried out, their responsibilities merge. The executive and his trustees must go hand in hand.

**The Relation of  
the Director to  
the Staff**

The third duty of a board is that of maintaining esprit de corps among the employees. As Mr. Russell Robb observes, this spirit grows not from below up, but from the top down. It is a reflection of the earnestness

of those directing.\* To bring about this loyalty, directors should contrive to get enough acquainted with their various subordinates to know which do what work well. This is often felt to be out of the question, because it takes time and may seem to slight the secretary's position as their superior. Both these objections can be met, however, by calling upon employees to report at committee meetings on special cases or on special pieces of work, and by welcoming their suggestions thereon. This would serve to make subordinates feel themselves identified with the activities of the board. The abler workers, in particular, feel this need of recognition and scope. I have known a number of instances in which a high grade of charity worker could have been more securely retained by encouraging his sense of influence in the administration. Unlike business, with its more military organization, charity depends for its success on making subordinate positions attractive to educated employees, and on inspiring them to self-devotion. Some may argue that under good direction a half-educated employee can do case work; and so he can, if one expects him merely to follow a routine. But if one expects case workers to see more than what lies on the surface, to discern elements that others may have missed, to get at complex causes, one must maintain as fine a personnel for this service as for that of directing. One might almost say that in social work no detail is unimportant if the right person looks at it. In order to keep this superior grade of subordinate a board must make sure that the secretary, while maintaining discipline, allows those serving under him sufficient scope for their ability. Trustees and executive together should take account of each worker's merits and aptitudes, and assign their positions and promotions accordingly. A society which employs a large force needs always to bear in mind the depressing effect of a big office on spirit and ambition. The individual grows to feel that he is of small account, that whereas any lapse below a certain standard—which he soon learns—will drop him, any special devotion may never come to the management's notice. I have in mind an office in which older employees frequently said to enthusiastic newcomers that it did not pay to show devotion, that no one knew the difference, or gave any credit for it. And what they said was true. If a visitor gave up half-holidays or worked over-time, nobody seemed to care; whereas if he was five minutes late for two or three mornings, he incurred a reproof. In the cases just cited, the only contact between office and board was through one director who, every four months or so, talked with the same executive. Of the workers he scarcely knew any, even by sight. The effect was what might have been foreseen. The abler employees took positions elsewhere as soon as they could; the less able settled down to a listless jog-trot.

When boards make a point of attracting educated people to subordinate positions, they ought to secure among them a fair number of workers who can discover new problems, or rather, new aspects of old

\* Russell Robb: *Stone and Webster Public Service Journal*, April, 1909.

problems, and who will, in the course of their daily work, accumulate facts with such care that conclusions deserving to be termed scientific may be drawn from them. Social research that involves an understanding of motives and feelings is best done, not as an impersonal study, but in the course of natural human contacts. Where human nature is concerned, the facts to be described are so many and so complex, that it takes the continued acquaintance which a case worker has with her charges to envisage them with that penetrating imaginative sympathy that can analyze motives and feelings with justice. I believe that the future development of charity lies in the direction of research as a by-product of case work by gifted subordinates. At present the abler worker tends to be drawn into executive positions. These positions are better paid, and carry a prestige not often given to those who deal immediately with dependents. But executives who have once ministered directly to beneficiaries must feel aware of their loss in the live grasp of problems. The fact is, one can hardly do original thinking on any social subject without some first-hand contact. Since original ability can find as full scope in field work as in executive work, may not the field agent come to bear as dignified a relation to the executive as the medical scientist does to the superintendent of a hospital? But if we are to have subordinates with mental initiative, directors must see to it that executives do not, through jealousy, suppress and discourage them, either by appropriating what they do, or by grudging it publicity. In the medical profession, in hospitals, this is a very real danger, and human nature does not change when it goes into charity. Executive and scientist, however, certainly occupy distinct fields, and it would seem as if the two activities could each find scope without collision.

The performance of the duty that rests on the director to acquaint himself with details and to maintain an esprit de corps among employees exacts from him no more time than is already given by many volunteers. But it does exact from him more thought upon systematizing what is to be presented to his colleagues and himself in their sessions.

**Membership on a Public Board** Such are the duties of a private board. A public board, except as regards the constitution of its body, has the same duties. It has, however, to cope with some special conditions. Public charity tends to ossify about the letter of the law. This tendency is due primarily to the natural human inertia that leads employees without external incentive to settle into humdrum. Even business industries have not yet solved the problem of getting from each man his maximum output. The typical government employee, the man who jogs on from year to year in a leisurely routine, is by no means peculiar to public charity. He exists partly because of an imperfect system of rewarding merit, whereby his pay advances usually according to his length of service rather than because of signal ability. He exists partly because of a wide-spread feeling that the government is everybody's big uncle. Apparently



people take it as a matter of course that government positions should be unexacting, and do not reflect that soft berths entail an unnecessary and expensive swelling of department staffs. I knew at one time a bright, energetic girl who got her first training and experience in a well-managed private charity. She then took a position in the public charity bureau of the same city. A few months after the change, she told me that her professional standards were deteriorating. She found that she could turn off so much more work than her colleagues that, in order to escape the odium of a pace-maker, she would finish her assignment of cases to be visited by noon, and take the balance of the day for herself. Her chief, she said, showed equal indifference to the capacity and enthusiasm she had showed before she learned the office standard, and to the lassitude she manifested afterwards.

Another influence tending to breed inertia is the working out of the civil service system. The security of tenure by which it attracts on the whole a higher grade of man, may then demoralize him. Even a promising employee will relax, when placed where only flagrant misbehavior will incur discharge. Whether or not his output rises above a minimum, he gets his increase year by year until he obtains the maximum salary for that class of work. Then, unless he is one of the few who push into another class, he knows "nor hope to rise, nor fear to fall." He is unlikely to get more, but he will never be dropped, and he inevitably slumps into routine. This tendency to stagnate trustees can counteract by occasionally receiving reports direct from employees. An "ex-official," writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, testifies as follows to the analogous practice of Mr. Roosevelt: "He was not content to listen to the perfunctory reports of cabinet officers, but claimed and exercised the privilege of dealing directly with any bureau chief or subordinate who could aid the executive by expert knowledge of complicated problems. The effect of this policy, while not always pleasing to cabinet officers, was inspiring in the extreme to subordinate officials; it spurred them to unprecedented zeal, which in turn was diffused by them among their subordinates. A new and surprising energy, a genuine awakening of enthusiasm for tasks made dull by long routine, took possession of the federal service."

Board and employees alike feel the influence of a third motive that makes for inertia and for an adherence to the letter of the law, namely, the fear of criticism. The work of any public board offers the stuff for political capital. One party administration may come in with the cry that the state boards are extravagant and that per capita costs must come down, while the authorities of a year later may hold the same trustees up to opprobrium because they have not introduced expensive equipment for the welfare of their dependents. Since there will always be diverse judgments on the propriety of expenditures, there can at any time be an excuse for either criticism. Added to this is the unfortunate fact that while scandals make entertaining newspaper stories, accounts of faithful service are as a rule dull reading. Consequently when a mistake made by some board becomes public,

the impression given is not that of a single oversight, but of a generally blundering administration whose incompetence has at last come to light. The effect upon a board of this lack of discrimination is to bring about at once timidity and indifference. Ex-President Taft has spoken\* of the undeserved or exaggerated fault-finding which is likely to descend upon public servants, often with the deplorable effect of making them callous even to discerning censure. Hit-or-miss blame makes labor seem rather thankless. It has another bad effect in that it leads to a short-sighted stand-pattism on the part of those under fire. They believe that since any defect, however inevitable, may be turned against them opprobriously, they can defend themselves only by covering up mistakes and disguising matters of doubt by an assured tone. They feel that admissions of weakness even to the extent of speaking of hopes for future development, may only be playing into the hands of those who are anxious to find a plea for putting them into the pillory. Such stand-pattism, if it succeeds for a time, may blind even the trustees themselves to the need of advancing with the spirit of their day. The difficulty here lies at bottom in an ill-defined notion of what they are to take as public opinion. What is public opinion? It is not, as commonly supposed, a definite and articulate judgment: it is rather a dominant but hazily defined trend of feeling. On any important social policy at any one time, there are diverse bodies of sentiment, conservative, radical, neutral, etc., which may remain inchoate, may wax or wane, and under favoring conditions may become articulate and dominant. All are potentially changeable, but they vary in tractability, according to the spirit of the times. People who have occasion to interpret public opinion sometimes make the mistake of giving a general sentiment some special application at which it has not yet arrived and may never do so. For instance, I remember hearing a business man maintain that public opinion was tending toward shorter sentences for drunkards. He mistook the sentiment in favor of probation and of lenience to first offenders as applicable even to chronic inebriates. The nature of public opinion is a vital matter to the members and executives of a public board, since they must interpret by its light the laws which they carry out. Even "the letter of the law" is no such precise thing as to exempt them from discretion in its application. When officials, in an attempt to escape criticism, fall back upon a literal interpretation of a statute that ignores its spirit, they are actually giving effect to the conservative sentiment in society. As I have seen officials, judges included, it has seemed to me that they are even nervously anxious to follow public opinion. The difficulty is that they do not discern which of the more or less nebulous bodies of sentiment is the one charged with the greatest momentum. Since ideals are in a constant state of change, and since they contain in themselves various degrees of vitality, it takes clear insight and often a certain moral elevation to decide which of many opinions is the one that deserves and is likely to win permanence.

\* In an address before the Lotus Club, New York, November 16, 1912.



Enlightened opinion is almost at no time popular, for when it has won a general acceptance, the issue has become stale. So rapidly, indeed, may public opinion change, that in order to keep abreast of enlightenment, a man must often uphold ideas not yet observably current; he must lead, that he may not lag behind. Public directors, embracing in their number the diverse points of view of representatives of various callings and traditions, should be able to discriminate which of the opinions afloat in society are merely passing social vagaries, and which have a sound basis of statesmanship. This question once determined, the constitution of their body should enable them to judge when they may wisely come out in frank leadership, and when they should employ the slower method of gradual persuasion. Their ideal might be taken from the words of Gladstone: "It must not be considered as the simple acceptance of public opinion, founded upon the discernment that it has risen to a certain height needful for a given work, like a tide. It is an insight into the facts of particular eras, and their relation one to another, which generates in the mind a conviction that the materials exist for forming a public opinion and for directing it to a particular end."\*

To this end directors should present a more personal appeal to the community than the official statements in their annual reports. These reports are necessarily encumbered with unreadable matter, reach only those professionally concerned, and often come out too late. Would it not be prudent for such boards from time to time to explain their policies and plans through signed editorials in the leading newspapers? The trustees themselves, by their executive officer, would have to prepare and be responsible for these short articles, since the ordinary newspaper reporter has not the professional knowledge to make clear the relation of their special constructive plans to large issues. Such an aggressive method on their part would disarm uninformed criticism, and would be a means by which trustees could bring their knowledge and experience to bear in forming public opinion.

Directors, public or private, who maintain a high standard in their own society thereby qualify themselves to conceive clearly the function which that society should fulfil in its relation to other philanthropies in city and state. They are, as it were, a committee from society at large, entrusted with the duty of seeing that the success of a special charity should be at one with the public interest.

\* John Morley: *Life of Gladstone*. Vol. II, p. 240.

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